

Use storytelling to understand culture



Culture is something which is created and resides in the *minds* of people. If culture is something that exists in peoples' minds, there needs to be a different way of understanding culture, rather than through traditional Culture Assessments. These traditional assessments usually hone in on just a handful of elements — communication, for example, or decision making. Culture is complex and requires a holistic view. Why do we not listen to what people have to say?

Edgar Schein (1996) defined culture as the basic implicit assumptions about how the world is and ought to be, that a group of people share and that determines their perceptions, thoughts, feelings and their overt behavior. Below is his model, represented as an iceberg. Culture assessments traditionally focus on the visible and tangible aspects of an organisation, the Artifacts. To understand a culture, it is thus critical to spend time understanding the non-tangible aspects, below the iceberg's surface, which is in fact the bulk of culture.

One way of uncovering peoples' beliefs, commitment, feelings, justifications, mind-set, philosophy, understanding and assumptions (the list goes on) is to listen to their stories and their narrative.

Telling and listening to stories are traditional, even ancient, means of understanding and passing on culture. Stories are one of the most powerful emotional currencies that we own. Storytelling is a powerful tool as *both* a means of understanding and transmitting organisational culture. When individual's stories do not match up to the organisation's aspirations, you know there is a problem.

So the next time you are gauging your organisation's culture, why not begin with asking your employees "What's a typical day like here?" or "Tell me about a time when you..."

Sources

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